



Malachi - Chapter One

Summary of Chapter One

Malachi introduces his prophecy as an oracle, the word of God. He starts by showing that God has loved Israel and has demonstrated it through protection from the nations surrounding them, nations that have been destroyed by God.

There is condemnation from God towards all the people of Israel, but particularly towards the priesthood who are required to show the example for others to follow, who have not performed their duties in making the appropriate offerings to God but have cheated him by offering up the damaged rather than the whole. They are accused of profaning the name of the Lord, yet he states that his name will be proclaimed throughout the nations.

a. Malachi 1:1 - Heading

Malachi acknowledges his role as a prophetic intermediary and explicitly identifies his book as the word of the Lord. In keeping with this, nearly half of the remaining 54 verses of this concise and profound book are punctuated with 'says the Lord of hosts,' 'says the Lord,' etc. Refer to the list in the Supplementary Material on the website. There is also a chart showing the usage of the phrase 'The Lord of Hosts' in the OT in the About section on the website.

¹ An oracle. The word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi.

Malachi 1:1

Similar to the headings found in Habakkuk 1:1, Zechariah 9:1 and 12:1, Malachi 1:1 identifies the contents of this work as an oracle or a burden, with implications of urgent responsibility and even dread, as detailed in Jeremiah 23:33-40.

While Malachi directs his message to the postexilic remnant state of Judah, in Malachi 1:1 the prophet boldly confers on this people the ancient comprehensive

designation of Israel, thereby identifying them as accountable for all the covenant obligations and as heirs of all the covenant promises of God.

b. Malachi 1:2-5 - Israel Preferred to Edom

Malachi exposes and answers the doubts of his contemporaries who question God's love because of their political, economic, and spiritual destitution.

² I have loved you, says the Lord. But you say, 'How have you loved us?' Is not Esau Jacob's brother? says the Lord. Yet I have loved Jacob ³ but I have hated Esau; I have made his hill country a desolation and his heritage a desert for jackals.

Malachi 1:2-3

I have loved you, says the Lord. Malachi will have a lot of specific correction for Israel, but before God corrects he assures them of his love. This lays a foundation for their obedience, because if they love him, they will keep his commandments, just as Jesus has required of those who love him: <<*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*>> (John 14:15).

How have you loved us? This is the kind of question rarely spoken, but often harboured in the heart. It asks, 'God, if you really love me why are things the way they are?'

The prophecy of Malachi is built around seven questions the people asked God. These questions revealed their doubting, discouraged, sinful heart.

- In what way have you loved us? (Malachi 1:2)
- In what way have we despised your name? (Malachi 1:6)
- In what way have we defiled you? (Malachi 1:7)
- In what way have we wearied him? (Malachi 2:17)
- In what way shall we return? (Malachi 3:7)
- In what way have we robbed you? (Malachi 3:8)
- In what way have we spoken against you? (Malachi 3:13)

In a classic text, which Paul quotes in Romans 9:13, Malachi appeals to God's elective and unconditional love of Jacob and corresponding hatred of Esau. In this context loved refers to choice rather than affection, and hated refers to rejection rather than animosity, which was explicitly prohibited against Edomites, Esau's descendants, in Deuteronomy 23:7. There is similar use of these terms in: <<*To be a partner of a thief is to hate one's own life; one hears the victim's curse, but discloses nothing*>> (Proverbs 29:24), <<*Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple*>> (Luke 14:26), and: <<*No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted*>>

to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth>> (Luke 16:13).

Although Jacob and Esau were brothers, Jacob experienced God's sovereign favour by which he was granted a privileged role in redemptive history as a bearer of the messianic promise, while Esau experienced God's rejection in terms of this same role. Malachi's concern, however, is primarily with the nations of Israel and Edom, of which Jacob and Esau were the representatives and progenitors. To Malachi's contemporaries, it must have seemed that the prophet had committed a terrible blunder by citing the contrasting national fates of Israel and Edom as proof of Israel's favoured status. If God had chosen Jacob/Israel over Esau/Edom, why did he allow his people to suffer the total devastation of their country in 586 BC by Nebuchadnezzar and 70 years of Babylonian captivity, while Edom remained intact and seemed only to benefit from Israel's loss? Malachi makes his point, however, by alluding to Jeremiah 9:11. Two centuries earlier Jeremiah announced the Lord's impending judgement against Judah: ***<<I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a lair of jackals; and I will make the towns of Judah a desolation without inhabitant>>***. By applying this same threat to Edom, Malachi makes clear that, like Judah, Edom would not escape God's judgement. It is likely that this judgement came through the agency of Nabataean Arabs, who gradually forced the Edomites from their homeland between 550 and 400 BC, causing them to resettle in an area later called Idumæa. Being semi-nomadic, the Nabataeans allowed the cities of Edom to go to ruin while their herds overgrazed and destroyed previously arable land. Whereas Judah was graciously restored after her punishment, reflecting the Lord's love for his people, Edom's judgement was to be permanent and irreversible (v.4). There would continue to be individual Edomites, implied by v.4; and confirmed in the time of Jesus by: ***<<Jesus departed with his disciples to the lake, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him; hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judæa, Jerusalem, Idumæa, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon>>*** (Mark 3:7-8), but they had forfeited their national identity.

I have made his hill country a desolation and his heritage a desert for jackals.

The idea of God's preference for Jacob over Esau also extended to their descendants. The nation descended from Jacob (Israel) was conquered by the Babylonian Empire, and so was the nation descended from Esau (Edom). Yet God restored Israel from exile and at this point Edom had not been restored. God chose to show more favour to Jacob and his descendants.

⁴ If Edom says, 'We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins,' the Lord of hosts says: They may build, but I will tear down, until they are called the wicked country, the people with whom the Lord is angry for ever. ⁵ Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, 'Great is the Lord beyond the borders of Israel!'

Malachi 1:4-5

They may build, but I will tear down. God promises that Edom will be permanently ruined, and that their status as un-chosen will never change: <<*The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter Zion, is accomplished, he will keep you in exile no longer; but your iniquity, O daughter Edom, he will punish, he will uncover your sins*>> (Lamentations 4:22), and: <<*Thus says the Lord God: Because Edom acted vengefully against the house of Judah and has grievously offended in taking vengeance upon them, therefore thus says the Lord God, I will stretch out my hand against Edom, and cut off from it humans and animals, and I will make it desolate; from Teman even to Dedan they shall fall by the sword. I will lay my vengeance upon Edom by the hand of my people Israel; and they shall act in Edom according to my anger and according to my wrath; and they shall know my vengeance, says the Lord God*>> (Ezekiel 25:12-14). As a reflection of God's steadfast commitment to Israel, this is a comfort to God's people - once he chose Israel they stay chosen, and God will not forsake them and choose another.

Beyond the borders of Israel. A chastened Israel will acknowledge the Lord's universal sovereignty: <<*Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other*>> (Isaiah 45:22). This universal perspective, sometimes misunderstood as if it implied God's acceptance of the religions of other nations, is a subtheme to which the prophet returns in v.11, v.14, and 3:12.

c. Malachi 1:6-2:9 - Corruption of the Priesthood

In his second disputation Malachi turns the tables on the complaint treated in the first. What should be questioned is not God's love for Israel but Israel's love for God. Malachi recognises that all the people were guilty of dishonouring God, as revealed in their begrudging offerings (v.14). Nevertheless, he focuses on Israel's priests (2:1-9) because it is their responsibility to guard the sanctuary from defilement and to inspect all sacrifices so as to exclude, for example, blind, lame, or sick animals (v.8), as stated in the law; refer to Leviticus 22:17-25, Deuteronomy 15:21 and 17:1.

⁶ A son honours his father, and servants their master. If then I am a father, where is the honour due to me? And if I am a master, where is the respect due to me? says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. You say, 'How have we despised your name?' ⁷ By offering polluted food on my altar. And you say, 'How have we polluted it?' By thinking that the Lord's table may be despised. ⁸ When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not wrong? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not wrong? Try presenting that

to your governor; will he be pleased with you or show you favour? says the Lord of hosts.

Malachi 1:6-8

Where is the honour due to me? Through Malachi, God asks the priests of Israel why they show so little respect and honour to him in their sacrifices. They call God **father** <<*And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father – the one in heaven*>> (Matthew 23:9), they call him **master** <<*Why do you call me “Lord, Lord”, and do not do what I tell you?*>> (Luke 6:46), yet they do not honour him or give reverence to him with their sacrifices.

To you, O priests, who despise my name. The priests of Israel presided over the sacrifices and it was their duty to uphold the honour and dignity of the sacrifices. Yet they offered defiled food to God, and offered animals that were blind, lame, or sick. Passages such as Leviticus 22:20-23 and Deuteronomy 15:21 clearly prohibited offering blemished sacrifices.

How have we despised your name? The priests were not even aware that they despised God with their actions. This means that it came by degrees; they probably did not know the extent of their offense, simply carrying on ‘business as usual.’ In ministry, it is easier than many people think to blindly continue in sin or mechanical indifference. God wanted Israel’s priests to think about their service to him, and he wants today’s ministers to think just as carefully.

By offering polluted food on my altar. The altar was the place of sacrifice, and it belonged to God. Yet the priests of Malachi’s day disgraced God and his altar by offering defiled food to him. Ministers today must never present defiled ‘food’ to God in their ministry.

By thinking that the Lord’s table may be despised. The priests were not grateful for their ministry, for their work before the Lord. They whined about what the people gave and the trouble of being a priest.

Try presenting that to your governor. The priests and the people tried to give to God things that the government would not accept as taxes. King David had a completely different heart, saying: <<*I will not offer burnt-offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing*>> (2 Samuel 24:24b).

⁹ And now implore the favour of God, that he may be gracious to us. The fault is yours. Will he show favour to any of you? says the Lord of hosts. ¹⁰ O that someone among you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hands. ¹¹ For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great

among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts.

Malachi 1:9-11

Now implore the favour of God, that he may be gracious to us. This phrase is rich with irony. Moffatt's paraphrase gives the sense: 'Try to pacify God and win his favour? How can he favour any one of you, says the Lord of hosts, when you offer him such sacrifices?'

O that someone among you would shut the temple doors. God thought it was better to shut the doors rather than to continue worthless worship. Not everything that is offered to God as worship is accepted by God as worship. Sometimes he would prefer that it just stop and simply says, 'I have no pleasure in you.' Many are concerned with church growth, evangelism, and planting churches. Yet in some cases the best thing that could be done for the cause of the Lord is to shut the doors on many churches: <<*For you say, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." You do not realise that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked*>> (Revelation 3:17).

My name is great among the nations. Yet, God will not go without worship. If the priests and people among the Jews will not worship him in Spirit and in truth, God will find worshippers among the Gentiles.

Surprisingly, Malachi refers to the presentation of incense and pure offerings in many places, even among the nations, rather than exclusively in the temple in Jerusalem as Deuteronomy Chapter 12 requires, as also confirmed by Malachi 3:3-4 and 4:4. A key to this controversial verse is to recognise that from the rising of the sun to its setting is standard predictive language regarding a future age of great blessing, for example: <<*The mighty one, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting*>> (Psalm 50:1), and: <<*From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised*>> (Psalm 113:3). Isaiah 45:6 and 59:19 include with this phrase a reference to the ultimate engrafting of the nations, suggesting that a similar meaning is implied in Malachi. This finds further definition in such texts as Isaiah 19:19-25 and 66:1-21, where the nations will be made to be Levites and will offer acceptable offerings on approved altars to the true God. For the engrafting of converted Gentiles into Israel refer to Ruth 1:16-17, Esther 8:17, Psalm 87, Isaiah 56:6-8, Zechariah 2:11 and 8:23.

¹² But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and the food for it may be despised. ¹³ 'What a weariness this is', you say, and you sniff at me, says the Lord of hosts. You bring what has

been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the Lord. ¹⁴ Cursed be the cheat who has a male in the flock and vows to give it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished; for I am a great King, says the Lord of hosts, and my name is revered among the nations.

Malachi 1:13-14

But you profane it, what a weariness this is. The priests' selfish, insincere worship was also unsatisfying to the worshippers. Because they did not meet God in their worship it was as hollow for them as it was for God. True worship is never contemptible or a weariness. Yet his people so often treat him in such ways: *<<And the Lord said to Moses, 'How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?>>* (Numbers 14:11).

Cursed be the cheat. In bringing God less than their best, they were deceivers, like Ananias and Sapphira who pretended to surrender everything to God but really did not. Refer to Acts 5:1-11.

I am a great King. They simply did not treat God like a great King, one to be feared and honoured. When one offers shallow, insincere worship to God he is not honoured as a great King: *<<For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods>>* (Psalm 95:3), and: *<<In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will bring about at the right time – he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords>>* (1 Timothy 6:13-15).